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THE MOST URGENT NEED IN OLD TESTAMENT STUDY.

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THE thing most urgently needed in our generation in the study of the Old Testament is the careful reëxamination of the Old Testament as it stands.

There are three things from which this is to be distinguished. First, it is to be distinguished from all forms of devotional or merely practical study of the Old Testament. Religion and conduct are the greatest things, but they or their relations to the Old Testament are not under discussion in this paper. Second, the examination of the Old Testament as it stands is to be distinguished from all mere application to it of received theories or traditions or external facts of any kind. Third, it is to be distinguished from all forms of study that start with reconstructions of the text or analysis into original documents. The thing called for is the study of the Old Testament as it stands, as distinguished from the study of its original component parts, and of the way in which they were put together.

The proposition thus defined calls for a form of Old Testament study different from that in which most students are now working; and yet the proposition is here, with all deference to the differing opinions and practices of men, most deliberately and confidently affirmed. Take the Old Testament writings as they stand in the Masoretic text, with only such corrections as are undoubtedly obvious. Use all other sources of information as merely secondary sources. Treat the phenomena which indicate composite authorship strictly with reference to the light they throw on the writings as they stand. On these principles, and within these limits, seek to ascertain the structure and the contents of the writings as we have them, postponing all

other questions, both of text criticism and of higher criticism, to later stages of the investigation.

The proposition here advocated is not that all students ought exclusively to follow this method. It is that any students who shall follow this method, and reach results, are contributing to the need that is now most urgent in this department of study.

In proof that the proposition is true, consider certain points in the existing situation.

1. First, we have, in the Old Testament as it stands, a body of writings of highly respectable character. To say nothing of divine inspiration, the men to whom we owe these writings in their present form were men of good thinking powers, and of literary appreciation and ability. This is evident from the fact that their work, for generation after generation, has been so highly esteemed. If these writings, as existing for the past twenty centuries, did not possess distinguished merit, the present call for studying them would not exist. The very fact that men are now interested in them is proof that they are deserving of attention.

It is the hexateuchal writings as existing in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, etc., that have thus attracted attention, and not these writings regarded as the work of men represented by J and E and P and D. It is as collected in our present Book of Isaiah that those poems have commanded the notice of men, and not as existing previously in some other form or connection. So with other instances. It is important to find out, if we can, the earlier forms in which any of these writings existed; but that should not lead us to forget that the form in which they now exist is important, and can never cease to be so. In the case of the writings that are composite, the work done by the editors is important; sometimes less important than that of the original authors, sometimes equally important, or more important, but always important in some degree. The men who put the Old Testament into its present form had high qualities. They had sources of information which we have not. They did their work in such a way that the centuries have put their seal of approval upon it. The probability is that they had

reasons, even when they followed purely mechanical methods—as, for instance, when they arranged some of the prophetic books on the principle of putting the biggest book first. The Old Testament as they left it is the Old Testament in which history takes an interest.

2. Again, the conditions of Old Testament study are such that in all departments the evidence depends largely on the present text as it stands.

In the text criticism of the Old Testament, for example, conjecture reigns to an extent greater than in most other writings. Very seldom does anyone prefer a variant reading from the Septuagint or the Aramaic or any other source, save upon the ground that the change is required by the context. A large proportion of the emendations that scholars have proposed are based purely on conjecture, and contradict the versions as well as the Hebrew. In the circumstances, how can one be qualified to judge of the correctness of the text, except as he first thoroughly understands the existing text? In the Old Testament, the thorough scientific study of the existing text is the necessary prerequisite to most that is important in text criticism.

The same is true in the problems of higher criticism. In these the evidence consists almost exclusively in the phenomena presented by the text as it stands. How can one rightly estimate this evidence except by becoming thoroughly familiar with the existing text? The process of analyzing a text into documents does not necessarily make one familiar with the text as it stands. One who scrutinizes a text mainly for the purpose of discovering literary criteria is not so very different from one who scrutinizes it mainly for the purpose of finding clauses to use in prayer or in proof of dogmas. All alike may study minutely, and yet fail of an adequate understanding of the text itself. And wherever the student fails to note the true meaning of the text, that is liable to vitiate his use of it, whether in prayer, or as dogmatic proof, or as a literary criterion.

The same is true in our study of the history recorded in the Old Testament, and in all other departments of study in which we may engage. A correct and appreciative knowledge of the

Old Testament as it stands is essential in them all. Lacking this as a prerequisite, our conclusions in every direction lack decisiveness.

3. Yet again, important as is the study of the contents and structure of the Old Testament in the text that has been handed down, and essential as this is to success in other departments of study, it has of late been relatively neglected.

In the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth this form of biblical study was pursued on a large scale; witness such English names as Ussher, Lightfoot, Prideaux, Hody, Whiston. These men did other things besides study the structure and contents of the existing Old Testament, but they did this thing; and they did it so well that their works and their opinions are still current. The work they did was good, up-to-date work for the time when they lived, though they often followed Josephus rather than the Old Testament, and were too much influenced by patristic tradition, and by theological bias. Thomas Hartwell Horne's great work on Old Testament Introduction, published in 1818, is a monumental collection of the results of the labors of men of this school.

The work of these men in ascertaining the structure and contents of the Old Testament has not, as a whole, been superseded. Parts of it have given way to more recent conclusions. It has been more or less modified and supplemented and patched. But it constitutes the basis of nearly all our current statements, and many of the modifications to which it has been subjected are not improvements.

4. But we ought to notice, as another point, that a vast body of additional evidence has been gathered since these men wrought; and that our understanding of the structure and contents of the existing Old Testament is not up to date unless it has been formed in the light of this new evidence.

We are very familiar with the thought that exploration has thrown fresh light upon the Bible. Our knowledge of the geography, the natural history, the archæology of biblical countries; of the recovered literatures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and of the history of nations as written in those literatures; and of

manuscripts of the Old Testament itself, or of related works, gives us greater advantages for Old Testament study. But we should not forget that the extended prevalence of scientific method has brought with it yet greater new advantages. To cite a single example, the laws of the Hebrew tense and of Hebrew noun derivation and syntax, as discovered or popularized by such men as Kautzsch and Driver and Harper, are more important for the understanding of the Old Testament than all that has been done by the spade.

These various sources of light have not been neglected by students of the Bible. In the middle decades of the present century they were very strongly used for throwing light upon the structure and contents of the existing Old Testament. Such works as Kitto's *Encyclopædia* and Smith's *Bible Dictionary* and the corresponding works in Germany, such commentaries as the Lange series or the *Bible Commentary*, with the whole growing swarm of Teachers' Bibles and like publications, bear witness to the industry of biblical scholars in this direction.

But the stress of effort came to be diverted toward a different point. For some decades past scholars have busied themselves with the attempt to resolve the Old Testament into its primitive elements, or with discrediting one another's attempts of this sort. These forms of study have largely superseded the attempt to understand the existing Old Testament in the light of the new facts that are available. Such works as Smith's *Bible Dictionary* and the Lange Commentaries are regarded by many as utterly antiquated. And it is certainly true that the intellectual movement which they represent was suddenly arrested when it had reached, in its combination of old and new elements, a very unsatisfactory and patchy condition. Just when scholars had well begun to use the new materials, the revolution occurred. For the past three decades energy has been devoted to questions of reconstruction rather than to the understanding of the Old Testament as at present constructed.

5. And so, to make a very broad generalization, we have at present two conflicting opinions, both based on the roughly modified traditions of the seventeenth century.

The first of the two may be described as the anti-reconstructionist opinion. Its advocates regard themselves as holding the views that have always been held concerning the Bible. They particularly object to attempts to resolve the books into their supposed primitive elements. In words they would at once accept the proposition advocated in this paper. But when it comes to an actual inquiry into the structure and contents of the Old Testament, many of them merely ask what is the correct traditional thing to say on these points, and are not disposed to go further. They prefer to devote their strength to refuting what they regard as the errors of their opponents.

The other opinion may be described as the reconstructionist opinion. Its advocates devote themselves to reconstructing the text by the aid of the versions and of conjectural criticism; to reconstructing the writings themselves by resolving them into the earlier writings from which they were composed; to reconstructing their contents by the aid of materials taken from other sources. With them reconstruction is the first step, and the writings are worthy of serious study only after reconstruction.

No attack is here made upon the current processes of critical reconstruction, as applied to the Old Testament. Among their advocates are men of ability, industry, and high spiritual qualities. A very large part of the work they have done is good work, and will stand. Perhaps the incrustations which had gathered upon the traditional views could not have been broken up and removed by any processes less radical than those which have been adopted. In any case they have their part in the solution of the problems that are now in hand.

But of many of the positions in the reconstructionist opinion it is certainly true that they are based on traditional understandings of the meanings of the Old Testament, and not on minute and careful direct study. When men discover a new Assyrian or Egyptian inscription, they spend weeks upon it; but when they come to compare it with the biblical fact, they assume that the common understanding of the fact is accurate enough for their purpose. Further, many of these positions

were taken too early to benefit from much of the recently added light from grammar and from archæology. In these and other particulars the current attempts at reconstruction were not preceded by a sufficient study of the Old Testament as it stands. So far as the reaching of final results is concerned, they have been premature. A sufficiently careful study of the existing Old Testament would compel an extensive revision of much that has been done in the way of text criticism and documentary analysis. Merely for the purpose of testing proposed processes of reconstruction, it is necessary to establish a more thorough understanding of the unreconstructed Old Testament. The better we understand these writings as their final authors left them, the better qualified we are to inquire as to the shape in which their final authors found them.

From the point of view of either opinion, therefore, comes this demand for the better study of the Old Testament in the form in which it has been handed down to us. The demand is not that all students shall leave other lines of investigation and turn exclusively to this, but that all shall heed the claims of this form of study, and that some shall devote themselves especially to it. The demand is not that men, under the claim that they are studying the Old Testament as it stands, shall ignore any truths taught by the reconstructionist critics. One can note these and give them due weight, though he himself studies from a different point of view. The demand is simply that the study from this other point of view be done, and be thoroughly done.

6. Finally it is to be said in favor of the kind of study here advocated that it fills the requirements of scientific method, and is likely to be directly fruitful.

Those who go to the Bible to gather proof texts for some doctrine practice a correct inductive method, provided they practice it correctly. Those who gather evangelistic Bible readings bearing on some point in duty or in experience may do this by a correct induction. Those who make inductions along lines marked out by some critical theory, or some supposed law of progress in history, may therein pursue a correct

and fruitful method. But surely, among these various forms of inductive study, there is room for one which shall have, as its direct purpose, simply the knowing of the Old Testament itself. It is safe to say that, even from a reconstructionist point of view, results reached through this form of study are quite as likely to prove final as those reached through any theory of reconstruction now in vogue. That is to say, the instances in which the whole, correctly understood, will contradict the parts, when these are correctly differentiated, cannot be relatively very numerous.

If we would set to work to study each of the Old Testament writings as the lovers of Browning study a poem of his; confident that the author had a meaning in his mind, that the meaning is worth discovery, and that, with sufficient skill and patience, extended through a hundred readings, if need be, it is discoverable; we should find the Old Testament even better worth our pains than Browning. Of course we are to recognize the possibilities of composite authorship. But if, after three minutes' examination of a difficulty, we are in the habit of pronouncing it insuperable, and seeking a remedy in conjectural reconstruction, then we ought to take lessons from the disciples of Browning. Two or three decades of the application of the Browning-club method to the Old Testament would be very profitable.